

“What’s Wrong With Me, Anyway?” Children Need Understanding, Not Labels

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I just met Scott today, when he came for his first Educational Kinesiology session. A nine-year-old boy with curious blue eyes, a big smile, and a sweet disposition, Scott spoke to me in quiet, indecipherable phrases that his mother quickly interpreted. When Scott first arrived, his mother handed me a stack of assessments and evaluations indicating ADHD, and listed several skills that Scott could not yet perform in the classroom. Yet, when I observed how much Scott learned in one hour and how well he responded to a movement-based instructional program—how lively and expressive he became—I was impressed and was once again reminded of my own story.

I was a late talker. I didn’t reach all of the developmental milestones, such as turning over, crawling, and standing, as fast as the other kids. I finally walked at age two, when I was ready. I skipped when I figured out how, and I rode a bicycle easily at age eight, after a couple of nasty falls. However, by age nine, when I was in the fourth grade, I still wasn’t reading. I failed that grade, and was held back. My mother was informed by a school counselor that I would never go to college or accomplish anything with my life. She wept beside my bed one night, wondering what would become of me. I was never that worried. My soul had its own learning pace.

Each of the roses in my garden blooms and fades at a different time, yet each has its own place, its own beauty. I have never heard of a flower with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. If a flower isn’t growing, we give it what it needs: water, nutrition, sunlight, patience, and love. Children often communicate through their behavior when they don’t know how to ask for what they need with words. What missing experience does a child communicate through fearful, rebellious, or hyperactive behavior? Why can’t we give children what they need to grow into their full and unique potential?

THE FARSIGHTED AND IMAGINATIVE CHILD

I was a left-eyed, right-brain-dominant child. Consistently, in the educational literature over the last seventy years, research has shown that more than 60 percent of

children labeled as having Minimal Brain Dysfunction, learning disabilities, and, more recently, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and ADHD (ADD with hyperactivity) are mixed-dominant* or left-eyed and right-brain-dominant. Three-quarters of those identified as having ADD behaviors are boys. With nearly 5% of the population of learners in the United States being labeled as having ADHD, what missing experience might these children be requesting of parents, teachers...classrooms? Research on language development consistently shows that the average male at age six and a half is up to two years behind his female counterpart in linguistic sophistication. These ADHD labeled children need specific support to become physically ready to process symbolic language in an auditory, linear presentation.

I came to school farsighted, full of imagination, and with a love of dance and music. (This is the profile of most ADD children who come to our Educational Kinesiology offices for evaluation and help.) Highly sensitive to my environment, I needed to move, touch, and explore in order to learn. I had difficulty sitting still and listening, especially for long periods, as was required in the classroom setting. It was hard for me as a farsighted child to focus both eyes together quickly, especially at near point, as is required for reading and writing. I needed to play and to feel safe—at one with my world, not separate from it. Even today, this is how I learn best. As a student, I needed to learn how to read and write about my experience after I had lived it, not before. I could make it abstract when I was kinesthetically ready, and not before I was ready, as the more auditory and analytic, left-brain, right-eye-dominant children seem to be able to do.

Is it the purpose of the school to inhibit the left eye and the right brain? Is it the task of the educational system to make everyone the same? Are we teaching children to suppress their natural creativity and aliveness in favor of memorizing information and learning not to move? In our eagerness for our children to succeed, we parents, teachers, and administrators can too easily be convinced that all children should develop and pay attention in one way only.

We can find it too easy to label those who have their own pace and learning styles as being somehow broken and in need of fixing.

When I was forced to focus on words as they lay on a flat, two-dimensional surface and when I was forced to write from left to right in a prescribed manner, I felt lost, frightened, and tense. The teacher never thought my O's were round enough or looked good enough. I vividly remember the stomachaches in school, and I remember crying all the way home. I felt alone, a stranger in a strange land.

Like most children, I could not learn easily or perform when under undue stress. Fear made me hypervigilant, unable to focus on new experiences. My senses were heightened as I reached for structure in my surroundings. In a tense environment, listening would get so acute that I could not hear myself think. My muscles would tense up, as though getting me ready to either run or freeze.

Children diagnosed with ADD are likewise not comfortable in their bodies. They need to feel safe in their musculature—they need to know that they are not threatened. Many need the kinesthetic feedback provided by movement in order to feel the size, weight, and shape of their bodies in space. Then they feel safe and can settle down. When movement is restricted or forbidden, children may comply and sit still, yet the internal tension may still be so great that they cannot think or express themselves creatively. Chemically, adrenaline has aroused the reticular formation of the brain, in order for the child to pay attention to the big picture for survival. As the senses are overstimulated and the pupils of the eyes are dilated (in order to see the periphery of the environment), no centralized attention is possible.

Fortunately, in my case, loving, accepting parents and the intervention of a wonderful teacher enabled me to relax, regain my excitement about learning, and accept academic challenges.

MOVEMENT AND PLAY MOTIVATES LEARNING

A movement program such as Brain Gym would have helped me to feel safe as I struggled with reading and writing, just as it provided safety and grounding for my young student, Scott. Scott easily learned the Brain Gym Lengthening Activities, which help release holding patterns in the tendons in the back of the body. The reflex to hold back is a survival response to events that the child perceives as



*The Footflex:
Grasp the
tender spots in
the ankle, calf,
and behind the
knee, one at a
time, while
slowly pointing
and flexing the
foot.*

life-threatening, perhaps something so seemingly simple as reading out loud in the reading circle. Once activated, this survival reflex may become a habituated response, unless it is specifically addressed. When the survival reflex is released, as it is with the use of Lengthening Activities*, children are once again able to participate, communicate, and engage more easily. My student Scott loved doing the Footflex and the Calf Pump with me, and his mother and I could hear the strength and clarity in his voice after he did them. In this relaxed state, Scott then enjoyed doing Double Doodles and Alphabet 8s, which help to integrate the left and right visual fields for reading and writing. Scott was suddenly motivated to copy his name, and now had the attention span to do it in a coordinated way, as his mother said she had never seen him do it before.

Educator Thomas Armstrong in his book *The Myth of the ADD child*, notes that “the most successful approach for kids who have been labeled ADD are in fact strategies that have been effective for *all* kids.” Skilled teachers around the world know that children learn best when there are clearly defined boundaries and expectations, appropriate to their needs and stages of development. What is true for *all* kids is *especially* true for the child labeled ADD.

ACKNOWLEDGING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

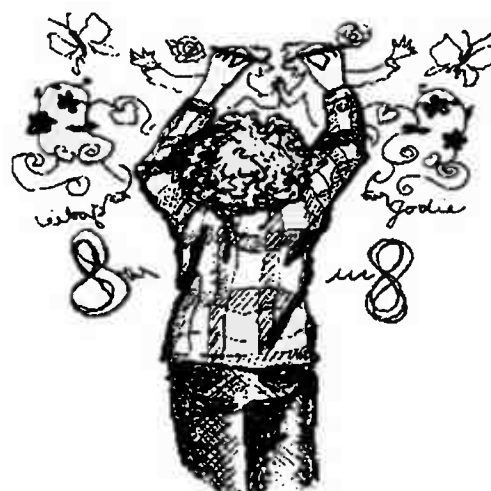
Many stories have been told about Albert Einstein, the preeminent genius of our time, who was considered learning-disabled and out of place in school. Einstein has been quoted as once saying, “Learning is experiential. Everything else is just information.” In his recent book *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, author, educator

and psychologist James Hillman chides us for “doing something wrong to a child to get rid of the wrong that is the symptom.” He encourages us instead to discover a new perception of children. “Looking for the acorn,” he says, “affects how we see each other and ourselves, letting us find some beauty in what we see and so love what we see. Thereby we may come to terms with the oddities of human character and the claims of its calling.”

Hillman goes on to refer to *Cradles of Eminence*, a study of the childhoods of four hundred famous modern persons. It seems that three-fifths of the subjects studied “had serious school problems.” For example, Ghandi reported that he “had no aptitude for lessons and rarely appreciated his teachers.” Writer William Saroyan said, “I resented school, but I never resented learning.” Winston Churchill refused to study mathematics—and was placed in what today would be termed a remedial reading class. Somehow, some of us have survived, and have succeeded in spite of our childhood educational evaluations.

I believe we are all whole as individuals and that we each hold that unique key to our own unfoldment within us. When a child comes to me for an Edu-K session, I see unlimited capability before me, waiting to blossom and flower in its own way. I don't want to be told how a child is broken. I have no desire to fix or change him or her. I believe that when we attempt to “fix” or “get rod of” behaviors that we don't like in our children, we inadvertently teach them that aspects of themselves are not worthy of love or compassion, rather than offering them a way to heal, integrate, and learn from the deeper meanings in their behaviors. Often, such split-off aspects of the personality will just emerge again later, still seeking a healthy avenue of expression. And in a broader sense, as a culture, can we learn from the behaviors of our children, or will we insist on forceful control and elimination of these behaviors, without ever benefiting from the wisdom that's there, waiting to be acknowledged?

In my own interactions with learners, what I do is to respectfully acknowledge the child right where he is, physically and emotionally, and address his physical, sensory skills as they are through reflex points and movements. Brain Gym® offers a child a new alternative to bring to the classroom; these simple movements add to his experience of the three-dimensional, sensory world, and give him permission to find his own body and feelings and be who he is. When compensations are reinforced, usually by empha-



Double Doodle: Draw with both hands at the same time: “in,” “out,” “up,” and “down,” to relax your eyes and hands and to make a surprising picture at the same time!

sizing one-eyed reading, one-handed writing, one-eared listening, and left-brain thinking, the feeling, imagination, personality, and creativity of the individual is stifled and inhibited. By providing opportunities for the development of binocular vision, bilateral drawing, binaural hearing, whole-body movement, and whole-brain thinking, the child's true nature is awakened.

I have seen children acquire as many as nine years of academic skills in one year, when they were ready. Let's provide joyful, movement filled, alive learning experiences for children and trust their abilities to get the information they need, when they are ready for it.

Hillman reminds us that “To see the angel in the malady requires an eye for the invisible . . . It is impossible to see the angel unless you first have a notion of it, otherwise the child is simply stupid, willful or pathological.”

REFERENCES

1. Hillman, James. 1996. *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, Warner Books, N.Y., 1996.
2. Armstrong, Thomas, Ph.D. 1995. *The Myth of the ADD Child*, a Dalton Book. N.Y.

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